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SUBJECT: STATELESSNESS IN COTE D'IVOIRE

ABIDJAN 00000997 001.2 OF 002

11. (SBU) Summary. Refugee Office Program Assistant participated in a September 13 trip organized by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Ministry of Justice to the towns of Meagui and Soube in western Cote d'Ivoire. The purpose of the trip was to examine statelessness issues. The trip participants learned that, as expected, the vast majority of potentially stateless persons are of Burkinabe origin, followed by persons whose origin is in other Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries. The lesson learned from this first assessment is that the problem of statelessness seems to result more from low awareness and interest in identification and naturalization procedures than from actual denial of citizenship by the government of Cote d'Ivoire. End Summary.

12. (U) Refugee Office Program Assistant participated in a September 13 trip organized by UNHCR and the Ministry of Justice to the towns of Meagui and Soube in western Cote d'Ivoire. Trip participants met with Secretary General of the Meagui Sub-Prefecture Vincent Sakpa Bra, who explained that the city hosts longtime migrants, mostly from Burkina Faso, but also from Mali, Guinea, Niger, and Senegal. Bra said that Burkinabes and Malians work in many coffee and cocoa plantations in the region. According to the 1998 national census, Meagui has a population of 211,900, but the breakdown by nationality has not been made public. According to Bra, the Sub-Prefecture used to register migrants' arrival in the area, but stopped doing so when the 2002 political crisis broke out in Cote d'Ivoire. He indicated that a substantial number of foreigners, especially the ones who live in remote areas, do not register their children's births at his office. Bra said city officials do not expect any major problems during the hearings, scheduled to start September 25, to provide replacement birth certificates to persons who never received one or lost theirs.

13. (U) Bra introduced the trip participants to a representative of the Burkinabe community, a 34-year old man who was born and raised in Cote d'Ivoire. This Burkinabe explained that he is not interested in acquiring Ivorian citizenship, but might consider applying for naturalization if there were a compelling reason to do so. It seems that the issue of land ownership is the key factor in decision-making for most rural migrants. Secretary General Bra said his office had assisted migrants with applications for citizenship and that 5 persons obtained citizenship. He did not clarify if any applicant whom his office assisted was denied citizenship.

14. (U) Trip participants met with Jean de Dieu Zoundi Mitibkieta, the Consul of Burkina Faso who has responsibility for the southwestern region of Cote d'Ivoire. Zoundi

Mitibkieta himself migrated to Cote d'Ivoire in 1947 and became an Ivorian citizen. The consul claimed that there are over 3 million Burkinabe migrants in the southwestern region of Cote d'Ivoire. He based this figure on field assessments conducted between 1996 and 1998. (Comment. This figure seems extremely high given Cote d'Ivoire's 2004 estimated total population of 18,700,000. End Comment.) The Consul stated that although there are numerous cases of Burkinabe migrants who lack birth certificates and/or identity papers, only a very small number are unable to prove any legal relationship with either Burkina Faso or Cote d'Ivoire.

15. (SBU) Comment. Persons born to one Ivorian parent anywhere in the world are Ivorian citizens. According to the Nationality Code, persons born in Cote d'Ivoire of foreign parents before December 1961 were entitled to apply for Ivorian citizenship in an expedited manner. A 2005 Presidential decision extended the expedited process to persons born in Cote d'Ivoire of foreign parents between December 20, 1961 and January 25, 1973. The expedited citizenship process requires documentation of birth in Cote d'Ivoire. The potential number of stateless persons will become clearer after the "audiences foraines" process, which began September 25, is completed. The "audiences foraines" are tribunals that will issue birth certificates to persons who never had them or who lost them. The issuance of birth certificates by the audiences foraines will permit many to take advantage of the expedited naturalization process. The potentially stateless will be those who have no documentation proving foreign citizenship, but who were unable to produce witnesses for the audiences foraines attesting to their birth in Cote d'Ivoire. UNHCR's work with the National Institute of Statistics to include recent variables in the 2008 National Census to allow for identification and counting of the number of potential stateless people is important and should be supported if possible. Considering that the last census took place in 1998, this will provide a unique, longed-for, opportunity to obtain reliable population figures

ABIDJAN 00000997 002 OF 002

and serve as a basis for decision-making about future PRM programming. UNHCR is planning a longer trip with the Ministry of Justice's Human Rights Section to visit additional villages and settlements hosting Burkinabe migrant communities. End Comment.

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